

Rep. Heidi E. Scheuermann Testimony
H.215 Ethics Bill
February 27, 2015
Government Operations Committee

Several times over the last few years, there have been publicized reports of elected and appointed officials benefitting from the ever-present “revolving door,” or a something of the like.

From sitting elected officials being employed by advocacy groups with business to conduct in the Vermont State House, to elected officials leaving their positions to lobby on behalf of these advocacy groups or business, to Executive Branch personnel departing that employment for employment at companies over which they had regulatory authority – Vermonters, rightly, have concerns.

To be clear, I am not accusing any individual of anything untoward – and certainly not of anything illegal. But, perception of a conflict of interest is there, and if there is one thing I have learned in my years in politics – it is that perception is reality.

What would the reaction be in Vermont if a legislator who fought for a significant corporate tax loophole - and won - shortly thereafter went to work for a corporation that had benefitted from it?

What would the reaction had been if a legislator on the House Agriculture Committee last year had been hired at that time by Monsanto to keep an eye on the debate regarding genetically modified organisms and help organize lobbying efforts if needed?

I am absolutely confident that in both of these situations, the reaction would, rightly, be outrage.

We hear over and over again the distrust the general public has for politics and politicians. While politics should be regarded as a noble profession, as it is a critical way to ensure government works for the people, it has, rightly in some cases, been reduced to the butt of late-night talk show jokes.

While ours is a small state, and our public officials are very accessible, that does not mean that transparency and accountability are present. And, it certainly does not mean that conflicts of interest issues don't arise.

So, first let me say, that I appreciate all of your work, and that of the House, last year on establishing the Code of Conduct and Ethics Panel in House Rules. I know it was a long process, and I appreciate that you made that effort.

But, I simply don't think House Rules is adequate. After all, House Rules cover neither the entire other legislative body, nor statewide elected officials or appointed officials in the Executive Branch of government.

For all of these reasons, I believe it is time for the Vermont Legislature to pass a law that would establish a code of conduct for ALL state legislators and for the Executive Branch, and statewide elected official.

H. 215 would do just that. Additionally, it would establish an Ethics Commission that would be empowered to receive and investigate complaints, and take any necessary action.

Vermonters deserve this kind of commitment, and this kind of transparency.

I believe strongly that the State should have in statute an Ethics Policy that outlines clearly the necessary disclosures, and conflicts of interest, and penalties that might be warranted if there is a violation. As importantly to me is the concept of an entity to which Vermonters would be able to go to file an inquiry or a complaint, and which would have the authority to investigate the claim and make a determination.

Vermonters deserve nothing less.